
Sebastian Veg, *Fictions du pouvoir chinois : Littérature, modernisme et démocratie au début du XX^e siècle*

Paris, Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2009, 384 pp.

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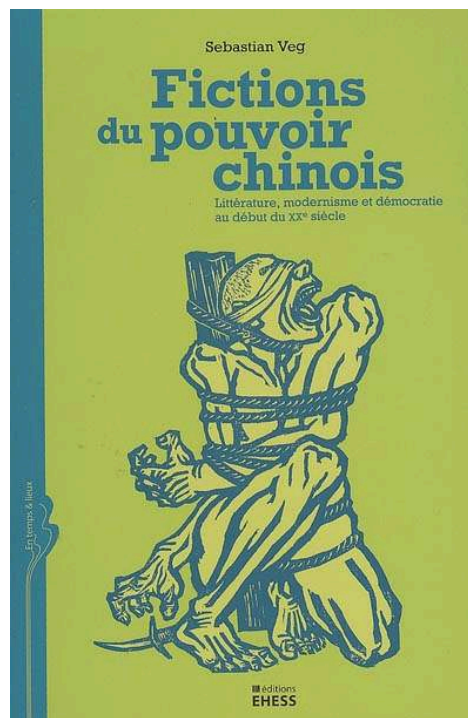
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The excellence of this book risks being unappreciated if it is taken as the usual sort of comparative literature study. Books in this field often treat their texts as offering varying perspectives on the same thing: the comparison pivots around what authors of different languages, nationalities, and periods do with a theme or genre taken as stable for the purposes of the investigation. It would be a mistake to read Sebastian Veg's book as reflecting "China," or the "image of China," in Victor Segalen, Franz Kafka, Lu Xun, Bertolt Brecht, and Lao She. Such a reading would be driven to hopeless superficiality, for Kafka's and Brecht's celestial empires seem to have little to do with the China experienced by Chinese people, and Segalen's, despite his travels, is always transforming into a figure of the "empire of the self"; none of these allegorised Chinas inhabits quite the same space as the China of Lu Xun and Lao She. On the other hand, writing a book about "China in the work of Lu Xun and Lao She" would



run the risk of indiscriminate inclusiveness: what in their work is not about China? An ordinary mind, given these materials, would achieve little.

But Veg's real subject is a relation, different for each work, between the power of fiction and the power of political organisation, both of which instantiate imaginary worlds and command assent, though in different ways and with different results; still, despite these differences, the early twentieth century caused both fictional and political representation to quaver. The forms taken by this multiply instantiated uncertainty succeed, in the end, in overstriding the boundaries of language and nation: "Here it is democratic modernism that brings together European and Chinese works in a simultaneous questioning of both traditional authority and of the literary tradition. [...] Beyond the given socio-political context, the question arises of a more general link between fiction and democracy in the modern age, or more broadly of the political value of modernism" (pp. 295-96).

Veg is an unrepentant modernist. That is, he sees the abandonment of traditional modes of expression in literature and the rebellion against traditional authority in politics and ethics as preparing for democratic self-government by autonomous individuals. He also considers that the modernist writers were aware of the ambiguities of this liberation: that freedom can be ill-used, that autonomy can lead to anomie. Current scholarship on modernism is much occupied with the question of "alternative" or "belated" modernities, a typology that grudgingly admits the existence of a standard or high modernity somewhere. Veg does not see modernism as divided into dominant and derivative streams. The faith in modern literature's power to transform society, so powerful among Chinese writers of the "May Fourth" generation, "interrogate in their turn the European modernists, in a reversal that does not consist of denouncing the intellectual colonisation of which the May Fourth Movement was supposedly one result, but which leads us to assess European modern texts on the scale of the liberatory confidence that Chinese writers placed in them" (p. 296). The worldwide current of modernism, for Veg, is not the flow of influences that were apparent to actors at the time, a flow going from West to East, but the "reversal" of that flow that occurs in the mind of the comparatist who comes to understand these various authors as all working on the same problems, more or less simultaneously, though in relative ignorance of one another.

The issues of fiction and democracy emerge differently from the contexts of each chapter. Veg draws them out of the works he studies; he imposes nothing. Indeed, asking the question of the relation of fiction and politics leads him to correct some long-standing perceptions. To those who charge Victor Segalen with a noxious nostalgia for the pageant of authority in imperial China, and a consequent contempt for the nascent Republic, Veg replies that the phantasm of a "radical political otherness" characterised by semiotic immediacy belongs to Segalen's narrator, not to the author, and that the dénouement of *René Leys* is indeed "the collapse of the orientalist aesthetic" (p. 54). Likewise, he finds in the seemingly timeless and schematic China of "The Great Wall" and other stories the core of Kafka's reflection on political modernisation, and in Lu Xun's "Ah Q" a dramatisation of the failure of normative reading. The apparent difference, in the minds of most readers, between Lu Xun's and Brecht's didacticism and Kafka's enigmas dissolves in the procedure, shared by all, of parodistic critique. "The self-referential mirroring of edifying literary genres gives Lu Xun, Brecht, and Kafka the chance to decry the instrumentalisation of fiction. [...] By

means of these often complex patterns, these three writers give tangible shape to their refusal of a simple normativity that the fictional text would have the task of transmitting” (p. 183).

- 5 Refusing the opposite but analogous solutions of cultural studies and aestheticism, Veg takes fictional works to be neither representations nor autonomous constructions but performative instantiations. For him, fictions have a status and pragmatic force that makes them “symbolic objects in their own right.” The task of the reader is to understand “how the act of writing and reading these fictions fits into their intellectual, social, and historical space” (p. 305). One can only hope that future studies of Chinese fiction – and of fictions of China – will take Sebastian Veg’s well-argued discussions as a starting point.

AUTHOR

HAUN SAUSSY

Professor at the University of Chicago.